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New FCIL Librarian Series: Evaluating Databases

Janet Kearney

Fordham University School of Law, jkearney15@law.fordham.edu

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New FCIL Librarian Series: Evaluating Databases

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By Janet Kearney (https://www.fordham.edu/info/23646/info/10740/janet_kearney)

This is the second (<https://fcilsis.wordpress.com/2019/10/08/new-fcil-librarian-series-welcome/>) in a series of posts documenting my experience as a new FCIL librarian. I started as Foreign & International Law Librarian at Fordham University School of Law in February 2019.

Heads up: I ask a lot of questions in this one. There is a short survey embedded, or I'd love to hear from y'all in the comments.

One of my favorite parts of my job is collection development – I've written on it before in a separate post (<https://fcilsis.wordpress.com/2019/06/24/collection-highlight-fordham-law/>) highlighting the Fordham Law collection. (Sarah Reis also wrote (<https://fcilsis.wordpress.com/2018/10/10/new-fcil-librarian-series-collection-development-and-electronic-resources/>) a bit about this in her New FCIL series.) It is such a balancing of interests. We want our resources to be useful to our users and that means critically considering their needs and how they access materials. We also want to be careful stewards of the collection. There are so many FCIL books and databases out there, but not every resource is necessary for every collection. How many Oxford books do we need on the sources of international law, let alone other publishers? Certainly not all of them. And of course, the cost of these resources can add up quickly – very quickly!

At Fordham, we have a culture of asking why: why are we collecting in this area; why do we have this series? We ask these questions in our acquisitions committee, made up of reference librarians, administrators, and some technical services librarians. We try to evaluate new materials in this way, as well as evaluating our past decisions – like, why do we have so many books on drones and blockchain? (The jury is still out on that one.)

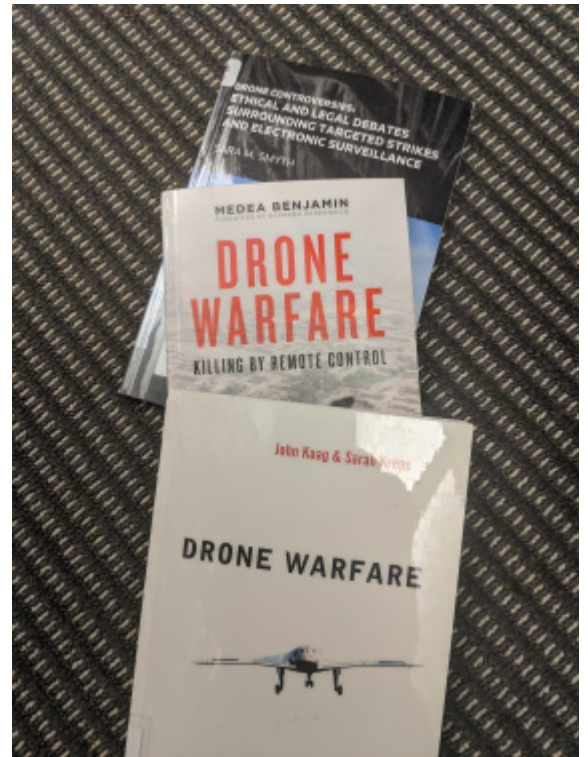
Evaluating databases is an important part of this. When an FCIL database renewal is upcoming, our collections management librarian will collect statistics and ask me to bring an evaluation of the resource to our acquisitions meeting.

So how do we evaluate databases? What are our best practices? Let me walk you through a recent example of how I evaluated a database that was up for renewal. In the survey at the end, let me know if you agree with the decision we reached.

Recently, we received a renewal invoice for the Readex Access UN (<https://www.readex.com/content/access-un>) resource. One of my supervisors asked me to look into it because in all her years, she'd never actually used it and wasn't sure if she even knew it existed. I had at least heard of it (yay!), but I

did not know how it was actually useful. Here are the questions I asked:

- *What is it?* The Access UN index from Readex (aka InfoBank) serves as an index for “United Nations documents including Official Records, masthead documents, draft resolutions, meeting records, UN Sales Publications, and the UN Treaty Series citations.” Some full-text is included.
- *Do some other schools have it?* Of the peer schools we use for comparison, 3 had it and 3 did not.
- *How functional is this resource for our users?* It seemed as if librarians could get used to the interface pretty quickly, but I had doubts about our students and faculty having the patience for it. Perhaps our users do not research heavily in the UN or because so many UN documents are easily discoverable online these days, I do not get a lot of questions for UN documents. On the other hand, we do have some active researchers that use UN materials, including seminars and the Leitner Center for International Law and Justice (<http://www.leitnercenter.org/>). But most of their research is current and this is better for historical materials – is it useful for our current researchers?
- *Do other librarians who have it actually use it?* For this I reached out to our FCIL-SIS chair, Loren Turner, who in turn connected me with other members to get their opinions. (Thanks for responding, by the way!) There were a wide variety of responses, and next time I think I’ll send the call out via the My Communities page so even more people can weigh in. Few of those consulted had used it, let alone regularly. Interestingly, in another group I asked the same question and essentially received the opposite answer! Those used it frequently for older UN materials.



A small sample of our drone books.

Ultimately, I recommended that we cancel it given the lack of requests for UN materials, our close proximity to the UN Library (<https://library.un.org/>), and the variety of available UN finding aids (the Digital Library (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/?ln=en>), ODS (<https://documents.un.org/prod/ods.nsf/home.xsp>), search.un.org (<https://search.un.org/>), and Hein for starters). Even though the cost is relatively minimal for a database, what is most important to me is the usefulness, and right now we do not have the demand for it. I find it difficult to recommend cancellation; at heart, I’m more of a library hoarder. It made it easier for me to be more realistic when I realized that the cancellation of a database is not the end of it! If need be, you can reorder it. (Not sure why it took me so long to realize that!)

Let me know what you think by filling out this survey (<https://forms.gle/nkUETUXHZ46rzRjH7>) (also embedded below)! I can share the results with the group.

Evaluating Databases

What factors do you consider when evaluating a database?

- ☐ Cost
- ☐ Whether your peer schools have it
- ☐ User need for the information
- ☐ Usability of the resource
- ☐ Other:

What is your approach to evaluating databases?

Your answer

Do you have Access UN?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If you have Access UN, in what ways do you use it?

Your answer

Do you think the evaluation method changes depending on the resource type?

This entry was posted in [collection development](#), [electronic research](#), [new FCIL librarians](#), [united nations](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

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